

# Sonoran Preserve Master Plan

**An Open Space Plan for the Phoenix Sonoran Desert**



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City of Phoenix Parks, Recreation and Library Department  
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Herberger Center for Design Excellence  
Arizona State University



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# Executive Summary

The Sonoran Preserve Master Plan has been prepared by the City of Phoenix Parks, Recreation and Library Department (PRLD) in cooperation with the Phoenix Sonoran Preserve Committee. This plan was presented to all interested City of Phoenix urban village planning committees, as well as the Environmental Quality Commission, and it received enthusiastic support. On January 22, 1998, the Parks and Recreation Board and the Phoenix Sonoran Preserve Committee both unanimously approved the plan at a joint meeting. The City Council unanimously approved this plan on February 17, 1998. Driving this effort is the fact that we live amid some of the most beautiful and biologically rich desert in the world and this valuable resource is being threatened at an increasing rate. With sensitive planning, a commitment to maintaining our quality of life, and quick action, we can accommodate quality growth and preservation of the Sonoran Desert. This Sonoran Preserve Master Plan builds on the Desert Preserve Preliminary Plan prepared in 1994, citizen involvement, and a database and ecological inventory prepared by the Parks, Recreation and Library Department in conjunction with Arizona State University.

The planning process for the Sonoran Preserve incorporates traditional planning techniques (inventory and analysis) with landscape ecological theory. Past open space preservation efforts have been primarily designated by only three criteria: slope, visual prominence, and land ownership. The Sonoran Preserve Master Plan attempts to develop a system that functions biologically—maintaining species diversity and ecological processes—while providing a recreational resource. We want to avoid the oversights of the past that created “sky islands” with miles of walls separating the mountain preserves from the greater community and the larger natural environment. The plan includes approximately 21,500 acres in north Phoenix. Additional lands also recommended for preservation include 1,000 acres adjacent to South Mountain Park. Several key goals were used to develop the plan.

## *Acquire a Diversity of Lands*

The preservation of rich vegetation mosaics will help the desert flora and fauna survive and flourish. The goal is to contribute to preserving biodiversity. Lands to be included in the Sonoran Preserve should span the spectrum from creosote-bush flats and washes to beautiful saguaro-studded hillsides.

## *Preserve Natural Hydrological Processes*

The water courses or washes are the most biologically diverse and ecologically significant component of the desert landscape. This goal envisions preserving the floodway (actual sandy wash from bank to bank), the definable 100-year floodplains, and sufficient buffers to allow wide enough corridors for wildlife movement and natural meandering of the wash course to occur over time. This represents a significant change in development practices and will ensure long-term preservation of washes, expand the land area within the preserve, and capture a diversity of vegetation communities.

## *Integrate a Preservation Ethic into the Overall Urban Form*

Public ownership is only a part of the objective. In the broadest terms, the preserve system should be made up of municipal recreation lands (major mountains, washes, and transition lands), flood control infrastructures (secondary and minor washes that could be county owned or privately held and maintained for nonstructural flood control), trails, scenic corridors, utility corridors, and privately held natural open space. This will integrate the desert into the urban fabric rather than preserve a series of isolated remnants of natural open space.

## *Maintain Internal and External Connectivity with the Sonoran Preserve System*

The Sonoran Preserve should connect with other public open space; for example, schools, parks, and other municipal lands that contribute toward preserving the natural environment. Creating viable connections for the movement of people and wildlife will greatly enhance both the ecological health of the preserve and recreation opportunities for the public. Lands that contribute to this effort include lands which are identified for preservation by the Maricopa Association of Governments, lands owned or managed by Maricopa County Parks Department, United States Forest Service, United States Bureau of Land Management, United States Bureau of Reclamation, Flood Control District of Maricopa County, City of Scottsdale, City of Peoria, Town of Cave Creek, and Town of Carefree.

Eighty percent, or 16,800 acres, of the lands recommended for preservation are owned by the Arizona State Land Department. Of these lands, approximately 15,000 acres are

within the city limits. These Trust Lands will require acquisition through the Arizona Preserve Initiative. Twenty percent, or 4,700 acres, are privately held lands. This ratio of state trust lands to private lands is approximately equivalent to the proportion of land ownership in the area and not a function of targeting either party. It is recommended that privately-owned lands targeted for preservation will be acquired primarily through the development process.

The master plan recommends three major access points that will include parking, picnicking, outdoor education, and visitor services. These will be similar in size and scope to Squaw Peak Park, Dreamy Draw Recreation Area, and North Mountain Park. An outdoor environmental education center is planned for one of these major gateways. Also recommended are a minimum of eight secondary entry points that will consist of parking lots on the edge of the preserve linking interior trails to the larger community. Multiple neighborhood access points are recommended to accommodate and focus walk-in use as well as alleviate congestion and degradation of the minor and secondary access points and the preserved lands. A detailed trails plan will need to be prepared in the near future.

This master plan creates a framework for a preserve system that builds on Phoenix’s history of setting aside significant Sonoran Desert land for recreation, open space, environmental education, and preservation of native flora and fauna. The successes and mistakes of the past are used as building blocks for the development of this plan and the designation of the preserve boundaries. Changes to existing city ordinances relating to floodplain management and subdivision development are recommended to support the goals of the plan.

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# Introduction

The City of Phoenix is distinguished by its stunning, instantly recognizable desert skyline. Our desert mountains and flatlands captivate visitors and bring perpetual joy to residents by offering beautiful vistas and invigorating outdoor adventures. The Sonoran Preserve Master Plan sets forth a blueprint for preserving this special landscape. The plan seeks to protect the plants and animals that inhabit the Sonoran Desert while creating access to these lands for the people who love them. In two unanimous actions on January 22, 1998, the City of Phoenix Parks and Recreation Board endorsed this master plan and agreed to ask the City Council to submit an application to the Arizona State Land Department for the acquisition of 15,000 acres under the Arizona Preserves Initiative. On February 17, 1998, the Council also voted unanimously to adopt the master plan and to move forward in acquiring this open space. In doing so, the Council continues a time-honored precedent for protecting and preserving desert open space within the city and for ensuring recreational access for our citizens.

Beginning 75 years ago, Phoenix citizens and elected officials have taken numerous actions to create the Phoenix Mountain Preserves, South Mountain Park, and other preserved desert open space. Forward-looking city leaders secured the 16,500-acre centerpiece of the preserves—South Mountain Park—well in advance of the neighborhood development that now encompasses it. In its first year, 1924, some 36,000 people visited the park; in 1997, an estimated three million visitors accessed the park's many trails and picnic areas. In 1960 the city was able to secure just 350 precious acres at the top of Camelback Mountain, a landmark that was already encircled by private homes. Then, in 1972, the public voted to expand the Phoenix Mountain Preserves by 10,500 acres with the addition of the North Mountain range. This addition increased opportunities for the city's rapidly growing population to commune with our desert environment. The Phoenix Parks, Recreation and Library Department staff continues to address open space issues, seeking to maintain a respectful balance between neighborhood security and privacy while ensuring public access.

It is now time to prepare for the next stage of the city's growth, to set forth on the path of implementing the Sonoran Preserve Master Plan. By creating a process for the identification and acquisition of public open space in advance of the impending development, the plan will serve as a model for growth that serves the interests of neighborhood residents by providing excellent public access to outdoor spaces.

The Parks and Recreation Board has been privileged to work with the superb staff of the City of Phoenix Parks, Recreation and Library Department, other city departments, the citizen members of the Phoenix Sonoran Preserve Committee, Mayor Skip Rimsza, members of the Phoenix City Council, and Arizona State University. Their participation in the development and support of this plan has been invaluable. We look forward to working toward its realization for the residents of the City of Phoenix—those living here today and those who will be among us in the decades to come.

Florence Eckstein, Chair  
Phoenix Parks and Recreation Board